

## **2010 1to1 Customer Champions**

### **“Customer Experience Takes Flight With Proactive Service”**

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#### **Fred Taylor**

**Senior Manager, Proactive Customer Service Communications  
Southwest Airlines**

*Fred Taylor believes in creating good karma between the company and customers in order to thrive in the competitive airline industry.*

Southwest's Fred Taylor is proud of his unofficial title: Chief Apology Officer. To him, this nickname illustrates his commitment to customers. As the senior manager of proactive customer service communications, it's his job to communicate with customers in advance of flight delays, cancellations, and other flight disruptions.

"Aside from safety and cost management, customer service is the cornerstone of everything we do [at Southwest]," Taylor says. And that goes for both internal and external customers. "The objective of every employee is to deliver excellent service to their immediate customers. Everything we do has some customer service element to it."

In Taylor's case, that means proactively communicating via SMS and email to millions of Southwest passengers with its automated flight change notification service, powered by Varolii. Since August 2008 Southwest has sent more than 5.7 million messages to notify customers of flight delays, cancellations, and gate changes. The messages also link back to a dedicated portion of Southwest's website so customers can easily change flights. The airline has decreased the amount of time passengers spend on the phone with an agent or standing in line at airport service counters, Taylor says. "We're trying to get in front of customers before they leave the house or office."

Taylor's passion for Southwest customers began from the start of his Southwest career. Considering a possible run at law school, he was instead swayed to join the company after learning of Southwest's customer service philosophy and culture. He began as a call center representative in Louisville, KY, in 1997. But he wasn't satisfied with the constraints of his job description. "My curiosity about the company always existed," he says. "On my days off I would spend a day in the field in different departments," often visiting other airports and helping with baggage claim, gate check-in, and other tasks. "My interest grew from that and I worked my way up the ladder." He eventually became a supervisor at the Baltimore hub.

His dedication to customers caught the eye of President Emeritus Colleen Barrett, then executive vice president of customers. In June 2001 she brought him to corporate headquarters in Dallas to run the proactive communication efforts. "The idea is to take care of you before, during, and after a flight," he says. That means assessing the operational plan, anticipating disruptions, accommodating passengers when disruptions happen, and communicating effectively. The company started with automated voice calls, but moved to text and email in 2009. "It creates good karma between the company and customer."

Taylor says his biggest challenge is keeping up with an almost instant world. "We need to keep up with the expectations that customers have formed of us," he says. To do that, the company tries to be as personal as possible when communicating about specific flights, routes, and customer preferences, and give updates and acknowledgement as things happen. "It gives you a fuzzy feeling when you get it right in delivering on a personal level." The error rate on the proactive messaging is less than 10 percent.

Southwest's unique culture and resources have allowed Taylor to execute on his commitment to customers. It's a commitment he takes very seriously. "Delivering customer service isn't necessarily an immediate win," he says. "Over the long term you build brand and reputation. Your intentions have to be right and you must think of the expectations you're creating. Can you uphold them on a regular basis? You damn sure better be able to do it around the clock and live up to high customer expectations every step of the way." --